

Document A

This photograph shows a family in front of their sod home. There were few trees on the Great Plains, so wood for building was scarce. Homesteaders constructed walls for their homes by stacking 3" thick slabs of sod cut from the prairie. Because photographs were rare, subjects often took a portrait seriously, dressing in their best clothes.



Title: Melanthen Price, West Union, Custer County, Nebraska.

Date: 1886

Photographer: Solomon Butcher

Document B

The photograph shows a father with his three children in front of their home. Butcher reported that the mother of the children had died and that the photograph was taken just after a heavy rainstorm. The roof had just collapsed under the weight of the wet sod on the top of the home.



Title: Three motherless children and a caved-in soddy [sod home]

Location: Custer County, Nebraska

Date: 1887

Photographer: Solomon Butcher

Document C

This photograph shows the Shores family. Jerry Shores, who is seated second from the right, had been enslaved decades earlier. Thousands of African Americans moved to the Great Plains from the South in the 1870s and 1880s for the opportunity to own land – and in hopes of escaping the oppression and injustice they experienced in the South.



Title: The Shores family near Westerville, Custer County, Nebraska.

Date: 1887

Photographer: Solomon Butcher

Document D

Parents with their three children standing in front of their home. Butcher typically asked those he photographed to face the sun to improve the lighting for the image, which is why his subjects often appear to be squinting or looking down slightly. Because any movement would cause the image to be blurry, the subjects typically posed for the photographs, remaining still.



Title: Starting a New Family Northwest of West Union, Nebraska.

Location: Custer County, Nebraska

Date: 1886

Photographer: Solomon Butcher

Document E

This photograph shows a family with their livestock. Butcher reported that the family wanted to take the photograph with their piano so that their relatives back East would see it. However, they did not want their family to see the state of their house, so they asked to move it outdoors for the photograph.



Title: The David Hilton family near Weissert, Custer County, Nebraska.

Date: 1887

Photographer: Solomon Butcher

Guiding Questions

1. What does each photograph suggest about what life was like for homesteaders on the Great Plains in the 1880s?

Document A

Document B

Document C

Document D

Document E

Considering the questions above, what about the photographs might cause you to question whether they are useful evidence about life for homesteaders on the Great Plains?

4. Butcher took the photograph below in 1900, about 13-14 years after Photos A-E. The photograph supposedly depicts a man firing a gun at another man's feet to make him "dance". Butcher posed the scene and later altered the photograph to make it look like white smoke was coming out of the man's gun.



Does the fact that Butcher posed and altered a photograph in 1900 affect your evaluation of the reliability of Photographs A-E?